DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 110 416 SP 009 395

AUTHOR Welch, Paula
TITLE American Women: Early Pursuit for Olympic Laurels.
PUB DATE Apr 75
NOTE 13p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Athletes; *Athletics; *Females; Golf; History; Sex Discrimination; Swimming; Tennis; *Womens Athletics
IDENTIFIERS *Olympics

ABSTRACT

Women were not considered in preliminary discussions concerning the events, designation of participants, competitive attire, and problems relating to amateurism in the first Olympic games. Golf was the first sport in which women participated in the Olympics, and the first woman to achieve Olympic recognition for the United States did so by winning the women's international singles golf event in 1900. Women's tennis was included in the games of the second Olympiad, and archery for women in the third. Swimming and diving events were opened to women for the 1912 Olympics although the United States and France had voted against their inclusion. The United States did not have a women's swimming and diving team compete until 1920, at which time the U.S. team won four out of five events. At this same Olympiad, a conflict in scheduling arose between Olympic officials and the U.S. Lawn Tennis Association which prevented both men and women from representing the United States in tennis in the 1920 Olympics. Since the limited representation of American women during the first seven Olympiads, improvement can be seen in (a) performances, (b) the number of events open to women, (c) the increasing number of participants, (d) media coverage of women's competition, and (e) the acceptance of women who participate in sport. (PB)

**********
* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *
**********

ED110416

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

N.A.S.S.H. Presentation
April, 1975

# American Women: Early Pursuit for Olympic Laurels

Paula Welch

Baron Pierre de Coubertin, patriarch of the modern Olympic Games, did not recognize women in his Olympic revival strategy and women were excluded from the Olympic program of 1896. The events, designation of participants, competitive attire, and problems relating to amateurism in the Olympics were discussed only in light of male consideration.[1] In spite of Coubertin's chauvinistic attitude women gained gradual entry into Olympic sport.

According to Herbert Manchester, lawn tennis followed by golf became the first sports in which women engaged extensively in the United States.[2] Perhaps the popularity of golf explains in part why America's first Olympic encounter by women was in golf.

In the MacArthur room at Olympic House, New York City, placques recognizing golf medalists adorn two walls. The first woman to achieve Olympic recognition for the United States was Margaret Abbot. Abbot, of Chicago won the women's international singles golf event held in connection with the Paris Exposition of 1900. The Olympics of 1900 lasted nearly four months and many events taking place near Paris were associated with the Olympic Games. Most of the ten entries in the final round of

SP009 395

the women's golf championship were from France.[3] Women's tennis was included in the Games of the second Olympiad but there were no American entries.

The third Olympiad, coinciding with the World's Fair in St. Louis during 1904, included archery competition for women but entries came only from the United States.[4] The archery competition was declared an unofficial or exhibition sport. Four women archers are honored at Olympic House in the MacArthur room. The four honorees include Lydia Scott Howell, Double National, Double Columbia, and Ten Round Champion; the remaining Team Round winners were Mrs. H. C. Pollick, Miss L. Taylor, and Mrs. C. S. Woodruff.

The St. Louis Post Dispatch issued during the dates of the third Olympiad did not mention the women archers. Much of the news focused on the World's Fair, the Democratic National Convention, and official Olympic events. The Cincinnati Enquirer contained a brief narrative of the archery events that qualified archers for the St. Louis Games. The Ohio Archery Association, using C. J. Strong's archery range, sponsored the tournament that sent qualifiers to the "national meeting or the World's Fair grounds at St. Louis."[5]

Appearing in two of the first three Olympiads, the American women's participation was not entirely national or international in scope nor was their participation extensive. Records of total

American involvement regarding participants, coaches, and managers of women's teams are incomplete. Scant newspaper coverage of early Olympic participants dealt primarily with victors.

Although no women from the United States journeyed to London to compete in the Olympic Games of 1908, a few women from other nations took part in a limited program of display and competitive events. The Olympic report issued by the British Olympic Association records lawn tennis and archery competitions and displays of foils and mass exercise for women at the London Games.[6]

In June of 1910 at the Congress of the International Swimming Federation and again in May 1911, Great Britain requested that the International Olympic Committee open swimming and diving competition to ladies. The International Olympic Committee voted in favor of Great Britain's proposal and included swimming and diving events for women in the Stockholm Olympics.[7]

The United States and France were the only countries that opposed women's swimming. Everett C.Brown of the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States suggested that James E. Sullivan, organizer of the American Olympic Committee, was responsible for the negative vote cast by the United States at the international meetings.[8]

There is an indication that some women in this country were interested in the diving events at Stockholm. Ida Schnall, captain of the New York Female Giants baseball club attacked James E. Sullivan for preventing her from entering the diving

competition at Stockholm.[9]

The Amateur Athletic Union of the United States was the first group to assume control of women's swimming in this country. The control of women's swimming did not take place without opposition. James E. Sullivan's antagonistic attitude toward women's swimming was revealed in a number of incidents reported in The New York Times. In a letter to E.C. Brennan of the American Life Saving Society, Sullivan, President of the AAU wrote.:

> ...I notice in the papers that you are conducting schoolboy races in connection with women's events.
>
> Of course you know the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States does not permit women or girls to be registered in any of its associations, and does not sanction open races for women in connection with Amateur Athletic Union events.
>
> The Board of Education and the Public School Athletic League are very pronounced in relation to open competition for girls in athletics. They have no desire to make girls public characters.[10]

Apparently Sullivan believed that sport was a morally questionable experience for women.

Ida Schnall later wrote in The New York Times, attacking Sullivan's opposition to women's athletic competition:

> ...He is always objecting, and never doing anything to help the cause along for a girls' AAU. He objects to a mild game of ball or any kind of athletics for girls. He objects to girls wearing a comfortable bathing suit. He objects to so many things that it gives me cause to think he must be very narrow minded and that we are in the last century.[11]

In March of 1914, Sullivan was present at a meeting of the American Olympic Committee that recorded opposition "to women taking part in any event in which they could not wear long skirts."[12] The American Olympic Committee obviously ruled out vigorous sport and certainly swimming and diving competition for women.

An incident at Rye Beach in August, 1914 again brought the women's swimming issue under attack by Sullivan. The Rye Beach Swimming Club endangered its membership in the Metropolitan Association of the AAU when it conducted an exhibition fifty yard swim for women.[13]

Numerous requests for women's swimming events were refused by the Union during Sullivan's tenure. Sullivan died in September 1914 and by mid November of 1914 the AAU voted to assume control of women's swimming.[14] A major obstacle to Olympic competition and competition in general for women crumpled with the death of the puritanical James E. Sullivan.

There was no large scale move initiated by women to control or organize competitive sports for women in this country before the AAU entered the women's sport scene. An extensive national sport organization for women did not exist and there was no significant avenue from which to direct or develop leadership for programs.

Recognition of women as serious swimming competitors resulted from the AAUs decision to control women's swimming in this country. Women's swimming clubs developed and women began to prepare for swimming in a more organized manner.[15]

War caused cancelation of the Olympic Games of 1916. In 1970, Buck Dawson, Executive Director of the International Swimming Hall of Fame honored would be swimmers of the 1916 Olympics by requesting that former Olympic coaches select a 1916 mythical Olympic team by reviewing times registered before, during, and after the sixth Olympiad. The six women swimmers of the mythical swimming team were associated with swimming clubs in New York City, Philadelphia, Brookline, and Indianapolis.[16]

In 1916, Frederick Rubien, Metropolitan AAU President, reported that after two years of control AAU programs developed some outstanding swimmers. Rubien expressed concern for the apathy of women toward accepting leadership roles. Charlotte Epstein of the National Women's Life Saving League, reported that the League was interested in controling women's swimming but after two years was satisfied with the work done by the AAU.[17]

In the fall of 1917 the Women's Swimming Association (WSA) of New York City organized. The development of competitive swimming was one of the major objectives of the WSA. The National Women's Lifesaving League joined the new association offering not only a seasoned program but outstanding swimmers.[18]

The Olympic debut of American women swimmers and divers came at the celebration of the seventh Olympiad. On July 26, 1920 the first women to represent the United States in Olympic swimming and diving set sail for Antwerp. A sigh of relief was no doubt evident when the athletes were certain they were under way.[19] Financial problems plagued the Olympic team. Both men and women swimmers and divers were selected with the understanding that teams would be reduced if funds were not sufficient to cover Olympic expenses.[20]

Upon arrival in Antwerp the cocky girls commented on the slow, cold water and wanted more "spring" in the diving boards. Belgian swimmers were impressed with the Americans' skill. Suggesting that women were not capable of skilled performances, "the Belgians said they swam like men."[21] Further regard for the prowess of American women was disclosed when it was reported that all the foreign entrants withdrew from fancy diving after seeing the Americans practice. Fancy diving events were executed from the one and three meter boards.[22]

The United States first Olympic swimming gold medalist was Ethelda Bleibtrey. Bleibtrey placed first in all three women's Olympic swimming events. She won both the one hundred meter freestyle and the three hundred meter freestyle events and anchored the championship four hundred meter relay team.[23]

Aileen Riggin was the darling of the 1920 American Olympic team. At fourteen Riggin was the youngest and tiniest Olympic performer. On August 29, 1920, six days after Ethelda Bleibtrey inaugurated her pursuit for Olympic gold, Aileen Riggin became the first American woman to claim the Olympic fancy diving crown.[24]

Helen Wainwright captured the Olympic silver medal and Thelma Payne took the bronze laurel in the fancy diving event. Other medalists of the seventh Olympiad were Irene Guest and Frances Schroth who placed second and third in the one hundred meter freestyle competition. Completing the three hundred meter freestyle sweep led by Bleibtrey were second place Margaret Woodbridge and third place Frances Schroth. The championship four hundred meter relay in addition to anchor Ethelda Bleibtrey included Frances Schroth, Margaret Woodbridge, and Irene Guest.[25]

The United States first women's Olympic swimming and diving team won four out of five events. The only event in which they did not place in the top three positions was plain diving from the 4 and 8 meter boards. Triple sweeps by the Americans in fancy diving and the one hundred and three hundred meter freestyle events established unprecented success.

In summarizing America's performances at Antwerp, Coach of the women's aquatic team Louis Handley wrote:

> ...undoubtedly the selection of an American team of girls to represent the United States at the Olympic Games at Antwerp and their subsequent victories established amateur swimming for women as a sport for women in this country. These girls earned for themselves and established for their successors a respect which is universally accorded women swimmers quite as much for their personality as for their ability.[26]

Prior to the Antwerp Olympics the United States Lawn Tennis Association showed little interest in Olympic tennis except for the appearance of one man in 1904 and another in 1912. The USLTA included women in its membership and scheduled women's tournaments for a number of years before the seventh Olympiad.[27]

The Olympics of 1920 marked the beginning of dissension between the USLTA and Olympic officials. In November 1919, the USLTA accepted the American Olympic Committee's invitation to take part in the Antwerp Games. Not long after the USLTA accepted the Olympic invitation the dates for the Antwerp competition were announced. Because the Olympic competition coincided with the United States National Championships, the USLTA requested that Olympic authorities change the dates of the competition in Antwerp.

Olympic officials were unable to make the change because the tennis courts were not scheduled for completion until mid-August 1920 and later dates did not coincide with Olympic competition. America's Lawn Tennis Association withdrew from the Antwerp Olympics because the dates for Olympic tennis were

not altered. Thirteen nations entered Olympic tennis open to men and women in Antwerp.[28]

It appears that the obstinate behavior of the USLTA regarding the scheduling of events kept both men and women from representing the United States in 1920 Olympic tennis. It seems that the USLTA was in a better position to change an annual national tournament rather than to expect Olympic officials to change quadrennial competition involving thirteen nations.

Since the limited representation of American women during the first seven Olympiads improvement can be seen in performances, the number of events open to women the increasing number of participants, media coverage of women's competition, and the acceptance of women who participate in sport.

## References


1. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, "Why I Revived the Olympic Games," Fortnightly Review, July, 1908, pp. 111-15.

2. Herbert Manchester, Four Centuries of Sport in America 1490-1890. (New York: Derrydale Press, 1931), p. 227.

3. "Chicago Woman Wins at Paris," The Chicago Record, October 5, 1900, p. 6, col. 2.

4. E. G. Heath, The Grey Goose Wing A History of Archery. (Greenwich: New York Graphis Society, 1972), p. 207.

5. "Archery," The Cincinnati Enquirer, August 28, 1904, Sec. I, p. 8, col. 9.

6. Theodore Andrea Cook, ed., "Foil Display," Games of the Fourth Olympiad Official Report of Organizing Committee. (London: The British Olympic Association, 1908), pp. 170, 209, 412, 487.

7. Erik Bergvall, ed., "General Programme," The Fifth Olympiad the Official Report of the Olympic Games of Stockholm. (Stockholm Wahstrom and Widstrand, 1912), p. 713.

8. Amateur Athletic Union of the United States, Minutes of the November 17, 1914 Meeting. (New York: Waldorf-Astoria Hotel), p. 31.

9. "Hot Shot for 'Jim' Sullivan," The New York Times, July 19, 1913, p. 5, col. 8.

10. "Bar Mixed Athletics," The New York Times, July 13, 1913, Sec. IV, p. 2, col. 5.

11. "Hot Shot", The New York Times, July 19, 1913.

12. "No Women Athletes for American Team," The New York Times, March 31, 1914, p. 9, col. 5.

13. "Rye Beach Club in Bad," The New York Times, August 12, 1914, p. 7, col. 4.

14. Statement by Daniel Ferris, Secretary Emeritus of the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States, in a personal interview, New York, New York, March 13, 1973.

15. "Women's Swimming Club," The New York Times, December 9, 1914, p. 8, col. 8.

16. Buck Dawson, ed., "Hall of Fame Pick for Mythical U.S. Olympic Swimming Teams," International Swimming Hall of Fame Fifth Anniversary Yearbook 1965-1970. (Fort Lauderdale: International Swimming Hall of Fame, 1917), pp. 136-137.

17. "A.A.V. May Discard Women's Swimming," The New York Times, October 31, 1916, p. 10, col. 7.

18. "Women Swimmers Organize," The New York Times, October 21, 1917, p. 17, col. 4.

19. "Olympic Athletes Sail for Antwerp," The New York Times, July 27, 1920, p. 15, col. 4.

20. "Athletes Selected for Olympic Team," The New York Times, July 16, 1970, p. 14, col. 1.

21. "U. S. Athletes in Olympic Quarters," The New York Times, August 9, 1920, p. 11, col. 1.

22. "Will American Girls Decide the 1924 Olympics?" The Literary Digest, April, 1924, p. 62.

23. "Swimming (Women)", Report of the American Olympic Committee Seventh Olympic Games Antwerp, Belgium 1920. (Greenwich: Conde Mast Press, 1920), 320-21.

24. Buck Dawson, ed. "Aileen Riggin - Honor Diver and Swimmer," Swimming Hall of Fame 1968 Yearbook. (Fort Lauderdale: Swimming Hall of Fame, 1968), p. 30.

25. "Swimming (Women)," Report of the American Olympic Committee, 1920, pp. 320-22.

26. L deB Handley, Swimming for Women. (New York: American Sports Publishing Co., 1925, p. 7.

27. S. Wallis Merrihew, ed., "Lawn Tennis at the Olympic Games," American Law Tennis, October 15, 1920, p. 480.

28. Merrihew, p. 480.